

ON A 17TH CENTURY HERBARIUM SPECIMEN AND AN ARCHIVE LETTER IN CAL

V.P. PRASAD

*Central National Herbarium, Botanical Survey of India
P.O. Botanic Garden, Howrah – 711103, India
E-mail: prasad_parur@yahoo.com*

While revising the genus *Cyperus* for the Flora of India, the author has come across one historically important specimen along with a hand-written letter, attached to it. The letter was written on 2nd October 1900 by J.G. Luehmann from the National Herbarium, Melbourne, Australia, addressed to Major David Prain in Calcutta. Johann Georg Luehmann (1843-1904) was a very important person in the National Herbarium, Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne (MEL). He was an excellent botanist and was an assistant to the great botanist Ferdinand von Mueller from 1868 to 1896. He succeeded Mueller as Curator of the Melbourne Herbarium, and later as the Government Botanist of Victoria (<http://www.anbg.gov.au/biography/luehmann-johann-georg.html> - accessed on 21 May 2013). David Prain (1857-1944) was appointed as curator of the Calcutta Herbarium and librarian in 1887 and in 1898 became Superintendent of the Royal Botanic Garden at Calcutta as well as the Director of Botanical Survey of India and continued until 1905. He also served as professor of botany at the Medical College of Calcutta and in 1905 became the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where he remained until 1922 (<http://huntbot.andrew.cmu.edu/HIBD/Departments/Archives/Archives-HR/Prain.shtml> – accessed on 14 May 2013). Another eminent personality associated with the above mentioned letter and specimen is James Petiver (c 1665 – 1718) who was a British apothecary, entomologist and a botanist. He received many specimens, seeds and much other material from correspondents in the American and British colonies (Weiss, 1927).

The Letter from Melbourne

The letter which is an important record of the handwriting of J. G. Luehmann bears the number RBG/g2578 with the date 25-10-00 (must be 25-10-1900) in red ink. This number must be the inward (receipt) number given after its arrival in Calcutta. It is obvious that Prain was then the Superintendent of the Calcutta Garden. At present the paper on which the letter is written has become brittle and slightly damaged. Hence, it has been imaged after restoration, and the image (Plate 1) is reproduced here. At the beginning of the letter Luehmann acknowledges Prain with thanks for arranging to send three parcels of Indian plants to Melbourne herbarium. It is very clear from this letter that the Indian specimens were presented by David Prain and he made the arrangement for sending the parcels from London. Second part of the letter deals with 4 packets of the seeds of *Paspalum dilatatum*, a grass species sent by Luehmann from Melbourne to Prain in Calcutta. There is a mention about cultivation of this grass in Melbourne with certain amount of success. Also, it is written that some seeds were sent by request to the Agri. & Horti. Society some time back. The Agri. & Horti. Society in this letter must be the Agri Horticultural Society of India, Calcutta.

The specimen and its collector

The later part of the letter deals with the Indian specimen of *Cyperus* which accompanied the letter from Melbourne to Calcutta. The specimen is an unusual one mounted on a small (29.5 x 9 cm) piece of thin paper which was later on remounted on a standard herbarium sheet. It is incomplete, without underground parts or leaves, but just a mature inflorescence on portion of the culm is still in very good condition, with the spikelets having stamens, style, stigmas and mature achenes covered by the distichous glumes. The letter says it was collected between 1690 and 1700 by one Mr. Brown, and Petiver described this plant in *Philos. Transactions* in 1703. However, just below the title of the article, Petiver (1704) states that plants included “were gathered between the 15th and 20th of June, A.D. 1696, in the ways between Fort St. George and Trippetee, which is about 70 miles off.” Here, Trippetee is assumed to be Tirupati, the famous temple town of southern India. This

Register & return
 National Herbarium ^{RMS}
 Melbourne 2nd October 1900 _{92578 7/25/10/.}

Surgeon Major D. Prain M.D.
 Calcutta

Dear Sir

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of three parcels of Indian Plants from London that you have kindly presented to this Establishment. They arrived in very good order and I tender my sincere thanks for the same.

In accordance with your request I beg to forward herewith 2 lbs seeds of *Paspalum dilatatum* in 4 packets, by post. This grass has been cultivated here with a certain amount of success, but whether it will come up to expectations in every respect is an other matter. I sent some seeds by request to the Agric. Hortic. Society some time ago.

I also found a specimen of an Indian Cyperus, collected between 1690 and 1700 by a Mr. Brown and described by Peltzer in the Philos. Transactions 1703. I found several in the unarranged collections of herb. Sonder, they had not got them even in Kew, but in the British Museum there is a similar collection.

Yours gratefully
 J. G. Luehmann

Plate-1 : Scanned image of the letter from J.G. Luehmann to David Prain.



Plate-2 : Scanned image of the 17th century 'Madras' specimen in CAL.

specimen is an important proof to prove that the British started collecting plants from southern India in 17th century, much before Roxburgh, the father of Indian Botany who came to India in 1776 in the service of the East India Company.

As mentioned earlier, Petiver used to receive specimens from correspondents in the British colonies, and Dr. Samuel Brown was probably in regular contact with him. The number 592 found in the publication and on the specimen might be the serial number given either by Dr. Brown or by Petiver. Also 'PET' written at two places on the sheet might be the short form of Petiver. Initially it was difficult to ascertain who this plant collector Brown. But a long search for the name lead to the Indian Office Family History Search of the British Library (<http://indiafamily.bl.uk/ui/FullDisplay.aspx?RecordId=014-000054146> - accessed on 17 May 2013), in which there is an entry of one Samuel Brown who was a surgeon in Madras during that period. Further search for confirming identity of this Brown lead to a 1698 publication, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, London*, in which one title clearly says '*An account of some Indian plants etc. with their names, descriptions and virtues; communicated in a letter from Mr. James Petiver, Apothecary and Fellow of the Royal Society; to Mr. Samuel Brown, surgeon at Fort St. George*' (<https://archive.org/details/jstor-102545> – accessed on 01 November 2014).

The plant was named by Petiver, *l.c.* in polynomial system prevailed in those days as *Cyperus filicinus medius, panicula sparsa, e Madraspatan* and now the specimen has been identified as *Cyperus procerus* Rottb. The polynomial is of no use in identification of the plant, but clearly says it is from *Madraspatan* (Madras city/town). Also 'Madras' is written on a sticky strip used for fixing the specimen on the thin paper. An image of the specimen (Plate 2) is reproduced here to show how it was mounted on a small piece of thin paper on which margins are marked by pencil on all the four sides like a box.

It is evident that the specimen is a pre-linnean collection gifted to the Calcutta herbarium by Luehmann during Prain's time. As of now this particular specimen, collected more than 300 years ago is the oldest one came across in CAL, Howrah. However, in due course botanists working on different plant groups in CAL or in any other Indian herbaria may find specimens older than this. Until then this may be considered as the oldest herbarium specimen in India.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is thankful to the Director, Botanical Survey of India, Kolkata and the Head of Office, CAL, Howrah for the facilities. Thanks are due to Ms. Julia Buckley, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, UK for providing the link for the reference *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*. Thanks are also due to Mr. Anand Kumar, Botanical Assistant, Botanical Survey of India, Kolkata for scanning the letter and the specimen.

REFERENCES

- WEISS, H.B. 1927. James Petiver's Gazophylacii in *J. New York Entom. Soc.* 35: 411-414. - <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25004222> - accessed on 14 May, 2013.
- PETIVER, J. 1704. *Philosophical Transactions Vol. 23 (for the years 1702-1703)*. London. pp. 1251 & 1262. - <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=UuwyAQAAMAAJ> -- accessed on 01 November 2014.